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Digital marketing strategies that Millennials find appealing, motivating, or just annoying

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With the increasing usage of digital media by consumers, more companies are using digital marketing to reach their target markets. The purpose of this study is to examine various marketing strategies that are commonly used in digital media and ascertain which ones are preferred by Millennials and are effective in influencing behavior. Millennials have been identified as a driving force behind online shopping. While there have been numerous studies about online advertising, there has been little academic research focused on what types of digital marketing strategies are preferred by Millennials and which ones influence their behavior. A survey of 571 Millennials indicated a preference for online coupons and side-panel ads; Millennials do not like pop-up advertising. Graphics are highly effective in grabbing their attention. Millennials will repeatedly visit a website that has competitive prices and good shipping rates. If given an incentive, such as a discount or reward, Millennials will write an online product review.

Keywords: digital marketing; online advertising; Millennials; e-marketing

Why digital marketing and why Millennials?

With the increasing usage of digital media by consumers, more companies are using digital marketing to reach their target markets. By the end of 2010, the number of Internet users around the world will exceed 2 billion (Internet World Stats, 2010) and this vast information traffic will continue to double every 1–1.5 years (Kaynar & Amichai-Hamburger, 2008). Digital marketing is the practice of promoting products and services using digital distribution channels. Digital marketing is also referred to as e-marketing and includes digital or online advertising, which delivers marketing messages to customers. Companies are expected to spend more than $60 billion on digital advertising by 2011 (Lane, 2008). Reaching consumers through digital media is considered to be the most promising field of development for marketing in the upcoming decade (Okazaki, Katsukura, & Nishiyama, 2007).

The purpose of this study is to examine various marketing strategies that are commonly used in digital media and to ascertain which ones are affective and which ones are detrimental for the marketer. This paper specifically addresses the preferences of Millennials and the digital marketing strategies that influence their behavior. Millennials, also called Generation Y, are an essential ingredient in the development of e-commerce. Having grown up socializing and making purchases online, this generation's usage of e-commerce will continue to grow along with its discretionary income.

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Computers and mobile phones are commonplace tools for Millennials; you might even call them essential. Ninety-seven percent of Millennials in the USA own a computer and 94% own a mobile phone (Marketing Breakthroughs Inc., 2008). Millennials access digital media on a daily basis and have the ability to communicate and purchase from a supplier anywhere in the world. Due to their familiarity and usage of digital media, they have been identified as a driving force in online shopping.

The Internet, social networking, and inter-active technologies are empowering Millennials to be more active in the creation and advancement of products and brands. Word-of-mouth goes around the world these days. This generation wants to have input regarding all aspects of a product, even its promotion. Successful marketers should realign their techniques in order to positively engage these vocal consumers. Internet-empowered consumers are ready to 'jump on the bandwagon' if the digital message appeals to them, or shun a product if the message annoys them.

Digital marketing may be facing a black cloud on the horizon. There is mounting concern that consumers find some forms of digital marketing to be intrusive and thus annoying. Messages that interrupt a consumer's online activity create feelings of ill will toward the brand. Past research confirms that consumers have developed negative attitudes toward digital marketing that they consider intrusive (Li, Edwards, & Lee, 2002; McCoy, Everard, Polak, & Galletta, 2007; Ranchhod, 2007). There is a need for further research that identifies digital marketing strategies that attract and engage consumers, rather than annoy them.

Various forms of digital marketing strategies currently being used are examined in this study. The strategies were selected based upon exploratory research using 70 Millennials. This group listed the most common marketing strategies they encountered online. The strategies relate to online advertising and website features.

The specific online advertising strategies examined in this study are: pop-up ads; side-panel ads; coupons; email updates; YouTube videos; and advertising in the form of a game. The website features examined in this study are: layout; graphics; personalization; rewards; interactive; offering free items; shipping; pricing; and return policy. This study asked Millennials to name the marketing strategies that websites should avoid using. The following list of annoying digital strategies was evaluated: pop-ups; flashing items; links to sponsors; mandatory software downloads; and un-closable browser windows. Since online reviews influence the buying behavior of Millennials, marketers would be wise to solicit reviews for their product or company. This study uncovers the marketing strategies that are successful in motivating Millennials to write online reviews.

A survey of 571 Millennials was made to gather data for the study. Results indicate that Millennials prefer certain forms of online advertising, while finding others annoying. Results also indicate that there are digital marketing strategies that are considerably more effective than others in grabbing the attention of Millennials, motivating repeat visits to a website, and soliciting online reviews.

Literature review

There is general agreement that digital media have greatly impacted the way a marketer reaches today's consumer. Digital media refer to electronic media that disseminate information in digital formats. This includes any media available via computers, mobile phones, smart phones, or other digital devices such as digital outdoor signs. The Internet is a prominent venue of digital marketing. Digital advertising is a form of promotion that uses the Internet for the express purpose of delivering marketing messages. Digital or

online advertising has undergone phenomenal growth since its inception in 1994 (Robinson, Wysocka, & Hand, 2007). The Internet has become the fastest growing advertising medium of this decade (Ha, 2008). Advertisers spend hundreds of millions of dollars to place their ads on high-traffic websites. According to research, when people read an online advertisement, they are more likely to buy online. An advertising banner on the Internet can level the playing field between large and small companies (Smith, 2009).

The increase in online advertising is in response to the increase in consumers who use the Internet to buy and sell goods and services. This exchange of goods is referred to as e-commerce or electronic commerce. In a report on e-commerce prepared by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the financial crisis that began in 2008 boosted e-commerce sales worldwide, as consumers sought ways to reduce expenditures (Iafrica, 2009). E-commerce is predicted to grow in the USA, and even faster in Europe and developing countries (Schulman, 2008). Annual growth of e-commerce has been predicted to increase to 28%, while some individual countries have even greater growth rates. In India, for example, the e-commerce growth rate has been estimated as high as 51% per year (Marvist Consulting, 2008).

The Internet can be referred to as a pull medium because consumers choose the content they view. In effect, the consumer is pulling from a plethora and free flow of information (Pitta & Fowler, 2005). The average American spends approximately six hours per week surfing the Internet (*The Economist*, 2010). Consumers today can easily access product information and even have an exchange of opinions before making any purchase decision. Channels such as social networks and blogs have enabled consumers to access a large audience with whom to share their opinions and product reviews. Through these channels, consumers can have a strong impact on the sale and positioning of products. There is a growing tendency for consumers to put more trust in the opinions of other consumers rather than company-generated information.

Concern is escalating over consumers developing negative perceptions of digital advertising, mainly due to intrusive messages being delivered to their computers, mobile phones, and other devices (Chatterjee, 2008). Consumers do not like messages that are distracting, disturbing, forced, or interfere with their work. Pop-up ads can be especially intrusive to consumers because of the fact that they interrupt online tasks (Li et al., 2002). According to researchers in cognitive psychology, when people are interrupted from an online task, they react negatively to the need to expend mental effort to process additional information. The interruption also interferes with the person's attention, limiting the amount of information that is received and understood (McCoy et al., 2007). Thus, an intrusive message is contrary to the marketer's goal, since the consumer may not decode the message correctly.

While some research suggests that pop-up ads can create high levels of ad perception, recall, and intent to purchase (Chatterjee, 2008), other research has shown consumers become irritated by pop-up ads and thus avoid online advertising all together (Edwards, Li, & Lee, 2002). This negative perception of online advertising can carry over to the brand being advertised and have a negative impact upon brand equity. In a study by Truong and Simmons (2010), the majority of respondents had a negative perception of online advertising. Some of the respondents suggested that advertisers should provide rewards or value propositions in return for the privilege of pushing digital advertising upon them.

Past research has shown some forms of online advertising to be effective in influencing consumer behavior. Exposure to banner advertising was found to increase the probability of a consumer purchase (Goh & Chintagunta, 2006). However, recent online advertising has been described as ineffective, intrusive, and uninformative. One study showed that 69% of consumers think pop-up ads are annoying, and 23% said they would not return to

the website simply because of the ads. Consumers are more likely to adopt negative views of websites that contain online advertising (McCoy et al., 2007). This is consistent with a study by Cho and Cheon (2004) in which respondents felt that online advertising impeded them from attaining their goals. This along with a perceived excess of advertising clutter caused respondents to avoid online advertising.

The old pushed advertising approach is not highly effective with digital media. Marketers are in the process of finding ways to pull consumers to their websites and into a relationship. One successful method is the development of a brand community. Online brand communities are a popular venue for connecting with consumers who favor a certain brand and develop an image based upon it (Cova, Pace, & Park, 2007). Marketers are joining consumers online, in their social networks, search engines, and other favorite stomping grounds (Simmons, 2008).

For a business, one of the most valuable benefits of using digital media is their capacity to offer consumers a personalized relationship (Wind & Rangaswamy, 2001). Millennials respond to personalized messages. Advertisements should concentrate on a major factor influencing this age group, the fact that 'they are special' (Marketing Breakthroughs Inc., 2008). Personalization has also been shown to increase the level of loyalty a consumer holds toward a retailer (Srinivasan, Anderson, & Ponnavolu, 2002).

Online recommendations are one way to personalize a relationship. Online recommendations range from personal reviews from other customers to personalized recommendations provided by recommender engines or systems. Recommender systems are information sources that provide personalized information to consumers (Ansari, Essegaier, & Kohli, 2000). These systems use an information filtering technique in order to formulate product recommendations that are most likely to be of interest to the user. Marketers will benefit from providing recommendations to online consumers, especially if the source is providing personalized recommendations. Consumers focus more on the recommendation source itself than on the type of website on which the recommendation appears (Senecal & Nantel, 2004).

Online reviews are increasing in popularity, with 25% of the US online population reading these types of consumer-generated feedback (Li & Bernoff, 2008). According to Senecal and Nantel (2004), people who consult online product reviews purchased the recommended products twice as often as people who do not consult reviews. In a study by Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006), a good book review led to an increase in sales on the website containing the review. Online peer reviews are especially beneficial since subjects in the study were more prone to read an actual review rather than just reading summary statistics. Extremely negative reviews had a greater impact than extremely positive reviews. This finding also came out in a study regarding the impact of consumer product reviews on attitude toward the brand. Extremely negative reviews had a stronger influence on attitude toward the brand than extremely positive product reviews. The study also found that even a moderate amount of negativity negated the effect of extremely positive reviews (Lee, Rodgers, & Kim, 2009).

Millennials often look to peers to determine the merit of a website or a product. A study of over 7000 Internet users in France revealed that online peer reviews of video games positively influence consumers' purchasing decisions. The study also showed that the effect of online peer reviews is as important as the effects of personal and expert reviews (Bounie, Bourreau, Gensollen, & Waelbroeck, 2008). In recent years online product review forums have been exerting an increasingly powerful influence on consumer choice (Godes et al., 2005). Thirty-four percent of Millennials use websites as their primary source of news (Marketing Breakthroughs Inc., 2008).

Word of mouth (WOM) is seen as more credible than advertising as it is perceived as having passed through the evaluation of 'people like me' (Allsop, Bassett, & Hoskins, 2007). According to Keller (2007), WOM has become the most influential communication channel. The quantity of online reviews is often used to determine the product popularity because it is considered to represent the market performance of the product (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006).

Online consumer reviews provide a trusted source of product information for consumers and therefore a potentially valuable sales asset. Since online peer reviews can be very beneficial to a company, marketers should determine what motivates consumers to write these reviews. Today's digital generation, the Millennials, are more than willing to write reviews and provide consumer-generated product information. Twenty-eight percent of Millennials own a blog and 44% read blogs (Marketing Breakthroughs Inc., 2008). Consumer-generated commercials, podcasts, and blogs are on the rise with the aid of websites such as YouTube, V-Cam, and Google Video. Some Millennials prefer creating advertisements rather than watching them. Companies are becoming interested in leveraging consumer-generated content as a valuable digital marketing tool. Firms are proactively trying to induce consumers to spread the word about their products (Godes et al., 2005). It has become a business in itself to provide consumers a venue to voice their opinions. In return for consumer-generated content, some organizations pay cash, give points, or provide some other form of recognition (Chatterjee, 2001).

Marketers are rethinking their strategies targeted at Millennials. The brands that were popular with their parents are being rejected by this generation. Having grown up in an even more media-saturated, brand-conscious world than their parents, they respond to ads differently. The shift in brand preference may be due to a shift in values on the part of Millennials (Neuborne & Kerwin, 1999). Millennials want lives that are less structured and allow more time for themselves. They have the view that there is more to life than work (Alsch, 2000). This generation is very connected to its friends and acquaintances; it can communicate at any time, from anywhere, and in various forms.

The birth year range for Millennials varies, but a commonly used span is between 1981 and 1994. There are approximately 50 million Millennials in the United States (Jayson, 2010). The Millennials are the biggest generational group since the baby boomers. Their hefty size and buying power are making them attractive targets for many consumer industries. Millennials are different from other generations. Millennials are more racially diverse (one in three is not Caucasian), more of them come from single-parent households (one in four), and three in four have working mothers (Neuborne & Kerwin, 1999).

Tapscott (1998) asserts that the Internet has affected the Millennial generation in various ways. He imparts the following characteristics to Millennials: investigative; freely expressive; and having the need to authenticate. Alsch (2000) attributes Millennials with the need to control their environment. Again, the Internet had a part in fostering this sense of control. The Internet allows Millennials to exert control over the free market by expressing their opinions through a multitude of websites that potentially influence consumers and marketers.

This paper helps fill the need for further research into identifying the types of digital marketing strategies that are preferred by today's generation of digital consumers and which strategies influence their online behavior.

Hypotheses

Based on the preceding review of the literature the following hypotheses were formulated. Millennials are increasingly using the Internet for social interactions, work-related tasks,

and purchasing. As research shows, consumers do not like messages that are distracting, disturbing, forced, or interfere with their work. Believing that Millennials favor advertisements that are the less intrusive and have an aversion to forced ads, hypotheses 1 and 2 were formulated.

H1: Millennials prefer side-panel ads.
H2: Millennials do not like pop-up ads.

One of the most valuable benefits of using digital media is the capacity for a business to offer consumers a personalized relationship. Since Millennials have the desire to feel special, hypotheses 3 and 4 were formulated accordingly.

H3: Personalized digital marketing is the most successful at grabbing the attention of Millennials.
H4: Personalization is the most effective strategy for prompting Millennials to repeatedly visit a website.

Personal gain has always been a motivating factor in people's lives. Marketers are leveraging this human trait by offering incentives to consumers who will write an online peer review. With this in mind, hypothesis 5 was formulated.

H5: Millennials are motivated to write peer reviews if there is a personal benefit involved.

Survey results and discussion of findings

To determine which digital marketing strategies are preferred by Millennials and are effective in influencing behavior, 571 Millennials at a prominent south-west US university were surveyed in spring 2009. The respondents were students between the ages of 18 and 23. The exact birth years signifying Generation Y (also known as Millennials) will vary depending upon the source, but all groupings include the six-year span represented in this survey. Males accounted for 43% of the respondents, while females accounted for 57%.

H1: Preferred forms of online advertising

Common forms of digital advertising were analyzed, specifically, pop-up ads, side-panel ads, coupons, email updates, advertising in the form of a game, and video advertisements. Respondents were allowed to select three types of advertising that they most prefer. Results strongly supported hypothesis 1: Millennials do prefer side-panel ads. However, they also strongly favor coupons. Over 70% of respondents chose these two strategies as their preferred means of digital advertising.

Approximately half of the respondents prefer advertising on YouTube and email updates. Almost 40% favor advertisements in the form of a game. By far the least favorite type of digital advertising is pop-up ads. Less than 4% of the respondents like pop-up ads. In fact, as will be seen from a later question, Millennials find pop-up ads to be annoying. This is consistent with past research on pop-up advertising. Table 1 summarizes findings regarding online advertising.

H2: What to avoid in digital marketing

Results strongly supported hypothesis 2: Millennials do not like online pop-up advertisements. To determine which digital marketing strategies Millennials dislike,

survey participants indicated their level of agreement to a series of statements. Responses were made on a Likert scale, with 1 representing 'strongly disagree' and 5 representing 'strongly agree'. Respondents were given statements concerning five digital marketing strategies. Responses revealed that pop-up advertising is not the only digital marketing strategy that marketers should avoid.

Results of a one-sample t-test indicate that all statements were associated with means significantly different from neutral (3). Four of the statements had means greater than 4.0, showing a strong opinion to avoid using that digital marketing strategy. The other strategies that Millennials definitely dislike are: un-closable windows; mandatory downloads; and flashing items. A marketer would do well to avoid using these features on a website. Findings are summarized in Table 2.

H3: Digital marketing that grabs attention

While 46% of the respondents said that personalization on a website grabs their attention, personalization was not the most effective strategy in this endeavor. Thus, hypothesis 3 was not fully supported. The digital marketing strategy that overwhelmingly grabs the attention of a Millennial is the use of graphics. Respondents were asked to look at a list of website features and select up to three features that were most likely to grab their attention. Graphics capture the attention of 73% of the respondents. Approximately half of the respondents said that interactive features and bright colors seize their attention. A simple, professional layout captures the attention of 43% of the respondents. As shown in Table 3, the least attention-grabbing feature is the use of the word 'free'. However, the word 'free' does serve a purpose, as identified by the next survey question; free gifts will prompt repeat visits to a website.

H4: Digital marketing that prompts repeat visits

Loyal customers have always been the backbone of a business. There are many ways to motivate Millennials to repeatedly visit a website. Unlike the findings of the first two survey questions, there is not a single overriding approach for soliciting repeat visits. Hypothesis 4 stated that the most effective strategy for prompting repeat visits is personalization, but hypothesis 3 was not fully supported by the survey results. Even though personalization was effective on almost half of the respondents, other incentives are more successful in prompting repeat visits. The two most popular incentives, chosen by almost 70% of the respondents, are competitive prices and good shipping rates. As shown in Table 4, there are a variety of incentives that will solicit repeat visits by Millennials. Slightly over half of the respondents accredited their repeat visits to coupons, free gifts, and rewards for returning customers.

Table 1. Preferred online advertising.

Type of advertising	% of respondents
Coupons	73.6
Side-panel ads	70.3
Ads on YouTube	52.5
Email updates	51.1
Ads in game form	39.1
Pop-up ads	3.7

Note: Total does not add up to 100%; respondents could specify up to three choices.

Table 2. Digital marketing that marketers should avoid.

I prefer when product related websites avoid the following	Mean[a]
Avoid pop-ups on websites	4.35
Avoid un-closable windows	4.26
Avoid mandatory downloads	4.19
Avoid flashing items	4.08
Avoid links to sponsors	3.42

Note: All responses were significantly different from neutral (3.0).
[a] Mean on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is strongly disagree and 5 is strongly agree.

Table 3. Attention-grabbing digital marketing strategies.

Marketing strategy	% of respondents
Graphics	73.4
Bright colors	53.6
Interactive	50.6
Personalization	46.5
Simple, professional layout	43.1
'Free' (the word)	28.5

Note: Total does not add up to 100%; respondents could specify up to three choices.

Respondents were given a list and asked to choose up to three items that have an effect on their decision to repeatedly visit a website. Slightly less than half of the respondents said that updated product information and a favorable return policy prompts them to repeatedly visit a website. Even though an interactive website grabs the attention of half the Millennials, as discussed in Table 3, interaction prompts repeat visits from only about a third of the respondents. The feature that solicits the least repeat visits is email updates.

H5: Online reviews

Millennials often look to peers to determine the merit of a product. One way to increase product awareness, build a reputation, or gain customers is to have Millennials write online reviews (assuming they are positive reviews). So, how does one motivate a Millennial to write a review? Findings show that there are several effective motivators, all of which involve a personal benefit, thus, hypothesis 5 was supported.

Table 4. Incentives to repeatedly visit a website.

Incentive	% of respondents
Competitive prices	69.4
Good shipping rates	67.2
Coupons	57.7
Rewards for returning customers	52.4
Free gifts	52.3
Personalization	48.6
Updated product information	48.5
Favorable return policy	46.8
Interactive website	32.0
Email updates	26.4

Note: Total does not add up to 100%; respondents could specify up to three choices.

Table 5. Successful motivators for writing peer reviews.

The following motivates me to write peer reviews	Mean[a]
I receive a discount for writing a review	4.29
I receive a reward or reward points for writing a review	4.10
I receive a coupon for writing a review	4.03
It's easy and quick to write a review	3.75

Note: All responses were significantly different from neutral (3.0).
[a] Mean on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is strongly disagree and 5 is strongly agree.

Respondents answered questions regarding online reviews using a Likert scale; with 1 representing 'strongly disagree' and 5 representing 'strongly agree'. The most effective incentive is to offer a discount for writing a review (4.29). Almost as effective is to offer a reward or coupon for writing a review. All of the scores are shown in Table 5. Using a One-Sample T test, all of the statements had significantly different means from neutral (3). Making the review process easy and quick is not as strong a motivator for writing reviews.

ANOVA was used to test for gender differences in respondents. For all of the digital marketing strategies discussed in this paper, there is only one that had a significantly different effect on male and female respondents. Offering coupons in return for writing an online review was more of a motivator for females than males. The female and male means were 4.13 and 3.89, respectively.

Conclusions

While there have been numerous studies about online advertising, there has been little academic research focused on what types of digital marketing strategies are preferred by Millennials and which ones influence their behavior. Millennials are an essential ingredient in the development of e-commerce. Results of this study indicate that Millennials prefer certain forms of digital advertising, while avoiding others. Results also indicate that there are digital marketing strategies that are considerably more effective than others in grabbing the attention of Millennials, motivating repeat visits to a website, and soliciting online reviews. Data for the study were obtained via a survey of 571 Millennials.

In designing digital advertising, marketers should use side-panel ads and offer coupons if they want to appeal to Millennials. This generation also likes watching advertisements on YouTube. Do not use pop-up advertising or un-closable windows, unless your intent is to irritate the consumer.

Millennials are attracted to a website with brightly colored graphics. Digital media offer the opportunity to personalize websites and advertisements; marketers should take full advantage of this feature. This generation likes the personal touch and the chance to network with the marketer. Make your website interactive. Also make your website competitive on prices and shipping rates, as these are the top motivators for Millennials repeatedly visiting a website.

Online reviews are very influential, especially with Millennials. Encourage Millennials to write online reviews by giving them a discount or coupon as an incentive. This generation responds well to rewards. A 'freebie' may be a small price to pay in return for a positive review that is read by numerous Internet shoppers.

By taking into consideration the preferences of Millennials, a company can increase the effectiveness of its digital marketing aimed at this market segment. A company should not use online advertising that is considered intrusive and annoying, thus turning away

customers. Companies can attract customers by knowing which digital marketing strategies are engaging and prompt repeat business. A marketer who motivates and facilitates online reviews can utilize the free-flow of consumer-generated content to promote a brand or company. Companies should connect with this new generation of consumers on their turf, the digital arena; this will facilitate successful communications.

Limitations and future research

This study examines perspectives about digital marketing strategies based on a survey of 571 Millennials at one south-west US university. The study is limited to the extent that this sample is representative of other Millennials. Future studies could include broader samples of Millennials at other locations in the USA and other countries. Future studies could examine other generational groups and compare their responses to those of Millennials. Using the current study as a starting point, future studies could examine changing preferences toward digital marketing as technology advances.

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